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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 GEORGETOWN 000181

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [GY](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION DRAWS BATTLE LINE: ELECTION PREVIEW #4

REF: A. GEORGETOWN 71

- [B](#). GEORGETOWN 111
- [C](#). GEORGETOWN 137
- [D](#). GEORGETOWN 167
- [E](#). 05 GEORGETOWN 1350
- [F](#). 05 GEORGETOWN 1271

Classified By: Ambassador Roland W. Bullen
For reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Action Request for WHA: See para 15

[1](#). (SBU) SUMMARY. Technical preparations for Guyana's elections are proceeding reasonably well (ref A), but the process is deadlocked for political reasons. The main opposition party PNC/R, facing dim electoral prospects, is working to obstruct and discredit the election process. The PNC/R leadership is following a two-track strategy -- tentatively preparing for elections on the one hand but maneuvering for postponed elections on the other. The Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM) is now at an impasse over the issue of how to verify the voter list. The PNC/R has stated its demand clearly -- it will not go to elections unless GECOM conducts a full house-to-house verification of the entire list of 440,185 registered voters from 2001. Such an exercise is as lengthy, costly, and unnecessary as it sounds. Post and the rest of the international donor community continue to actively encourage GECOM and the political parties to communicate, resolve differences, and move ahead with elections preparations. However, this message does not appear to be getting through to elements determined to disrupt the process. If the OAS wants to put early crisis prevention in Guyana into practice, then the time has come.

Opposition Leader Corbin Addresses Nation, Attacks GECOM

[2](#). (U) Robert Corbin, leader of the opposition PNC/R, delivered an address to the nation on television February 14. This address was little more than a personal attack on GECOM for its purported lack of progress in addressing the PNC/R's concerns about the electoral process -- principally that the 2001 voter list (2001 OLE) must be verified through a full house-to-house verification exercise (see para 9).

[3](#). (C) The level of personal animosity that Corbin and the PNC/R are directing at GECOM and its embattled Chairman Dr. Steve Surujbally is cause for great concern. Surujbally has privately expressed fears for his personal safety. As the political atmosphere becomes more volatile, the risk that Surujbally will resign is increasing. His resignation would likely bring the electoral process to a standstill.

PNC/R Acting in Desperation

[4](#). (U) Corbin's address confirmed that the opposition would prefer to make GECOM and the voter list scapegoats rather than embark on a constructive political campaign. The PNC/R appears to be acting in desperation -- much of the party leadership is resigned to a poor election result and campaign funding sources are drying up.

[5](#). (C) In private conversations with Ambassador, persons associated with the opposition have indicated that Corbin believes the PNC/R will not win the election (Note: PNC/R received 42% of votes in the 2001 election) and that the PNC/R has failed to raise sufficient funds to run a competitive campaign largely because of concerns about Corbin's leadership. These interlocutors also warn (perhaps disingenuously) that the PNC/R does not fully control militant, armed elements that may resort to political violence if the opposition's demands are not met. The recent murder of Afro-Guyanese journalist/activist Ronald Waddell and reports of weapons shipments into Guyana have raised the tension level considerably (refs B and C).

Calls for Postponing/Boycotting Elections

16. (U) The PNC/R and some other opposition members see little to gain from elections in 2006 and would welcome a delay. They favor a period of shared governance between the PPP/C government and the opposition. This view stems from the Herdmanston accord that resolved the crisis after the 1997 election. The accord committed the government and the opposition to undertake broad constitutional reform to move beyond a winner-take-all, race-driven political system. This process has stalled and some feel that elections should not take place until these reforms are completed.

17. (U) For example, the African Cultural and Development Association (ACDA) has taken this position. ACDA placed a full-page advertisement in the January 18 Kaieteur News (one of two daily independent newspapers). The ad listed ten reasons why African Guyanese should not vote, such as another election without shared governance "would commit future generations of African people to powerlessness".

18. (U) There is no reason to even countenance the idea of postponing elections. On a technical level, GECOM is well placed to fulfill its mandate by August 4 -- to deliver an election in which each eligible voter is able to register and to vote only once. The Joint International Technical Assessor (JITA) has confirmed that preparations are proceeding satisfactorily. GECOM has developed a viable plan for "cleaning up" the 2001 OLE that will form the basis for the 2006 voter list. Polling day safeguards such as indelible ink and voter lists with photographs will minimize fraud.

Dispute Over Voter List Verification

19. (U) The opposition claims that the 2001 OLE is somehow padded with tens of thousands of ineligible or fictitious voters -- despite the fact that independent experts who examined the list vouched that it meets international standards. One frequently heard, baseless claim is that the tens of thousands of Guyanese who have emigrated since 2001 need to be removed from the voter list. On the contrary, article 59 of Guyana's constitution grants every Guyanese citizen the right to vote regardless of where they live.

110. (U) The PNC/R is demanding full house-to-house verification in order to legitimate the 2001 OLE -- an unnecessary, time-consuming, expensive exercise. GECOM has estimated this would take six months and cost USD 2 million, meaning it could not be completed by the August 4 constitutional due date for elections. Moreover, no law allows GECOM to remove registered voters who are not home when the verifiers come to check. Real and perceived elections shenanigans during the previous five decades continue to fuel mutual distrust between the PNC/R and governing PPP/C parties. However, a full house-to-house verification would simply lead to further disputes.

Supporting GECOM Process, But Election Still Guyana's Show

111. (U) Donors have undertaken several initiatives to keep the electoral process on track.

- Donors invited all political parties to the Canadian High Commission February 3 in the wake of Waddell's murder to condemn all forms of violence. Only the PNC/R refused to come, on the grounds that the "conditions did not facilitate a productive meeting", later specifying that the PNC/R could not be in the same room as the PPP/C.

- Donors met with Surujbally February 10 to urge him to improve GECOM's public relations effort with the political parties and the general public.

- OAS A/SYG Albert Ramdin and Commonwealth Secretariat Special Envoy to Guyana Sir Paul Reeves were both in Georgetown the week of February 13 consulting with political and civil society leaders. At a widely publicized symposium they both made clear that elections must proceed as constitutionally due and that boycotting the polls would be terribly self-defeating.

112. (SBU) While actively supporting the electoral process, the donors are determined not to allow GECOM, the GoG, or opposition parties to drag the international community into a situation where it is held accountable for the election process. The message is clear -- Guyanese are responsible for running this election.

Process Now Deadlocked, Crisis Prevention Needed

113. (U) Preparations for the 2006 elections have reached an impasse over the issue of voter list verification. The opposition PNC/R is adamant in its demand for full house-to-house verification. The six commissioners on the Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM) are deadlocked. The three who represent the opposition refuse to budge from this demand.

114. (C) Donor missions (U.S., Canada, UK, EU, UNDP, IMF, IDB) are in full agreement that the PNC/R must be approached soon to resolve this verification impasse. The donors further agree that Ramdin's concept of a "pre-election agreement" on a post-election agenda would be an effective bargaining chip (ref D). Agreement on a defined list of important political issues to be addressed immediately following the elections, with the international community as guarantor, would give the opposition an incentive to participate constructively. However, a pre-election agreement would require the Government of Guyana's full support in order to work. It would not be appropriate for the bilateral donors to initiate these discussions.

115. (SBU) Action Request: Post requests WHA to urge OAS to quickly approach the opposition parties and the Government of Guyana in order to foster a dialogue on the concept of a guaranteed pre-election agreement.

BULLEN